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The Reagan administration takes aim at bureaucrats and the press

Leaking ship fires warning shots

■ Ronald Reagan had it "up to my keister" with leaks of inside information during his first term, but found it almost impossible to stem the tide. The administration now thinks it has the answer: Dismiss the perpetrators and threaten to bring espionage charges against news organizations that publish sensitive disclosures.

The offensive follows a series of "serious national-security leaks" that officials contend have undercut U.S. intelligence, compromised relations with allies and chilled officials' willingness to speak openly behind closed doors. Risks from such disclosures are seen as all the greater as the U.S. presses arms talks before a planned U.S.-Soviet summit.

Reagan aides are flirting with a policy that critics say would be a U.S. equivalent of Britain's Official Secrets Act—under which both leakers and publishers of leaks can be prosecuted. Said Bernard Weinraub, *New York Times* White House correspondent: "Clearly, they are playing hard ball now."

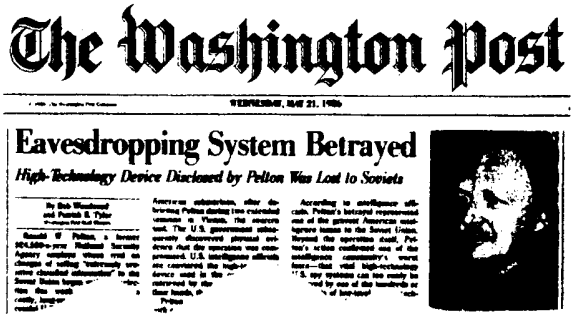
CIA Director William Casey asked the Justice Department on May 19 to consider charging NBC with espionage for a broadcast that said accused spy Ronald Pelton had given Moscow details of "Ivy Bells"—a U.S.-submarine-eavesdropping operation "inside Soviet harbors." Reports of such probes have appeared in the press intermittently for more than a decade.

Earlier, Casey had warned five newspapers and magazines that reporting details of intercepted Libyan communications could lead to prosecution under a 1917 espionage statute amended in 1950. In a landmark case last year, the U.S. used that law to convict a Navy employ Samuel L. Morison, for leaking a U. spy photo to a British magazine.

Casey's tough talk was being matched with action against bureaucrats caught leaking classified information. The first disciplined were mid-level Reagan appointees who apparently disclosed information in hopes of keeping policies conservative. Some believe the administration suffers from an unusual number of leaks because of ideological tensions in its ranks.

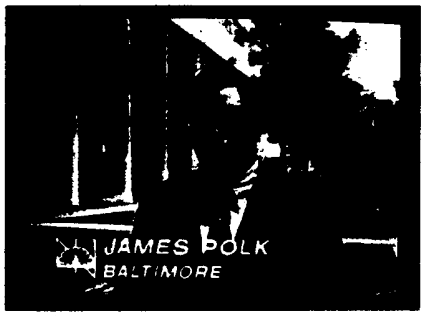
The State Department fired speech writer Spencer Warren on May 16 for leaking a cable from the U.S. ambassador to Argentina critical of House Speaker Thomas O'Neill. The Pentagon 17 days earlier dismissed Michael Pillsbury, assistant under secretary for policy planning, after leaks that showed Reagan secretly providing shoulder-to-air Stinger missiles to anti-Communist insurgents in Angola and Afghanistan. Pillsbury flunked a lie-detector test, a procedure the administration is using increasingly in leak investigations.

A senior White House official said the administration hoped to convince bureaucrats, "I'd better not do as much leaking as I have in the past, because I might get caught."


The Washington Post

Eavesdropping System Betrayed

High-Technology Device Disclosed by Pelton Was Lost to Soviets



***Washington Post* and NBC reports on underwater spying are enmeshed in the leaks controversy**

The crackdown comes on top of hat Secretary of State George Shultz alls a "gusher" of leaks. Reports on U.S. plans for bombing raids on Libya circulated in advance. U.S. appeals for Western Europe to isolate Libya were undercut by disclosure of a secret session between Libyan officials and the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. A CIA plot to lure Muammar Qadhafi into an embarrassing foreign adventure to help topple him was unmasked by the *Washington Post* last November.

Insiders insist all this is taking a toll. Reagan's consultations with Congress before the Libyan bombing mission were delayed until 3 hours before takeoff for fear of leaks, State Department legal adviser Abraham Sofaer told a House subcommittee. Exchanges of opinion have been stymied, said one aide. "You hold back."

For its part, the administration denied that it was conducting a crusade against leakers or the news media. Violations "should be investigated and if appropriate, prosecuted," said White House spokesman Larry Speakes, "whether it involves private citizens, the media or people who work for government."

Dragging news organizations into court, said Allan Adler of the American Civil Liberties Union, "if carried out will be extremely serious violations of the First Amendment."

It would be hard, however, for the government to prosecute without risking even more disclosure. Most experts think the threats are a bluff. "Three weeks from now some reporter will call the Justice Department, and they won't be able to remember what he is talking about," asserted Stephen Hess, author of the *Government-Press Connection.*

For the administration, the most immediate benefit of the offensive was a decision by the *Washington Post* to delay—and change—an article detailing damage from Pelton's alleged espionage. After officials' appeals to editors—culminating in a telephone call to *Post* Chairman Katharine Graham by Reagan himself in which possible prosecution was mentioned—the May 21 editions carried a story that the newspaper said deleted "a description of the technology Pelton allegedly betrayed."

The specifics, said Executive Editor Ben Bradlee, were "almost assuredly known to the Russians." He said the paper had honored requests by officials who argued that "if only a 1 percent chance exists that American lives would be endangered, the chance should not be taken."

With 4.3 million people holding security clearances and 22 million additional documents classified each year, no one expects disclosures to end.

"Leaks are like prostitution and gambling," said White House communications chief Patrick Buchanan. "You control these vices, you don't eliminate them." ■

by Stewart Powell with James M. Hildreth, Bob Horton and Miriam Horn

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